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ABSTRACT

The research on response facilitation factors in mail surveys is reviewed, and background is developed to enable the comparison of results obtained by two analytic approaches, a descriptive analysis and a meta-analysis, using the same set of studies. Specific criteria for sample and methodology were applied to studies extracted from four CD-ROM databases using search terms for mail survey combined with response rate. Multiple publications of the same study were deleted. The final listing of articles to be used in the reviews contained a total of 208 publications. After final agreement was reached on the studies that were to be included, the two reviews were conducted independently. A list of the 208 sources of studies is included. (Contains 11 references.) (SLD)

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ED 402 318

Reviewing the Research on Mail Survey Response Rates: Alternate Approaches (Symposium)

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The purpose of this session is to review the research on response facilitation factors in mail surveys and to compare the results obtained by two approaches, a descriptive analysis and a meta-analysis, using the same set of research studies.

Reviews on this topic have been conducted in the past using various methods, with some discrepancies in the findings (Boser & Clark, 1993). The reasons for the differences in findings may be at least partially due to the method used and/or the specific studies that served as a basis for the reviews.

The only variables for which there has been universal agreement about their improvement of response rates are the use of follow-up contacts and incentives. None of the previous reviews have used the same set of research studies as a basis as will be done in this investigation, and it is possible that some of the differences in findings may be the result of basing the reviews on different original studies. In addition to searching for answers to the long-standing question about which methods are most helpful in promoting response rates in mail surveys, this presentation will offer an opportunity to examine the effect of the method used to review the findings of multiple studies when the body of studies is held constant.

Some reviews, like those of Yu and Cooper (1983), have not isolated mail surveys but have included studies of response rate improvement techniques in telephone and/or face-to-face interview surveys. Still others have given no description of any criteria for the selection of the studies that were included in the review (Duncan, 1979; Harvey, 1987; Kanuk & Berenson, 1975), leaving the credibility of the findings to the judgment of the reader. Some reviews have focused on a single variable or a set of variables decided upon in advance of undertaking the investigation.

Reviews of research literature on mail survey methods have been facilitated by the development of computerized search procedures to locate relevant studies. Recent adaptations including the access of researchers to the databases via CD-ROM have further encouraged such reviews.

The methods used to compare and combine the results of various independent investigations are varied and have developed over time. The early reviews, such as those of Linsky (1975) depended on a descriptive approach. More recently, regression (Heberlein & Baumgartner, 1978), logit regression (Bruvold & Comer, 1988) and meta-analysis (Fox, Crask & Kim, 1988; Yammarino, Skinner, & Childers, 1991). While more sophisticated analytic approaches may provide more rapid results, they sometimes sacrifice specificity by having to collapse categories in order to obtain the numbers necessary for analysis.

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Method

For purposes of this investigation, the following criteria were established for studies to be included:

1. The study was focused on identification of variables that facilitate response rates in mail surveys.
2. The study used a split sample approach or an experimentally manipulated variable while the other procedures were held constant across groups.
3. Individuals were randomly or systematically assigned to groups.
4. The survey was done in the United States with a target population in this country.
5. The survey reported the response rate for each group.
6. The sample size was provided.
7. The written account of the survey was obtainable through published sources and written in the English language.
8. Studies in which the only manipulation was a comparison of mail surveys versus other procedures were inadmissible because they did not provide ways to improve mail surveys.
9. Surveys conducted by VAX or disk were not included.

The reference lists of previously published reviews on this topic were examined for studies that fit the inclusion criteria. In particular, reviews by Heberlein and Baumgartner (1978), Fox, Crask and Kim (1988), and Yammarino, Skinner and Childers (1991) served as initial sources because they used only studies that included an experimental design with one or more manipulated variables. The references cited in other reviews, such as those by Linsky (1975) and Bruvold and Comer (1988), were also examined for inclusion.

Computer searches of four CD-ROM databases were conducted using the search terms "mail survey" or "Mail surveys" combined with "response rate" or "response rates." The ABI/Inform database contains articles in marketing and business publications. Sociofile represents social science, PSYCLit the field of psychology, and ERIC the field of education. The number of citations identified in each search are listed below:

Sociofile	January 1974 through April 1995	86
ABI/Inform	January 1994 - June 1995	19
	January 1992 - December 1993	24
	January 1986 - December 1991	82
PSYCLit	January 1990 - June 1995	37
	January 1974 - December 1989	88
ERIC	January 1992 - March 1995	48*
	January 1982 - December 1991	107*
	January 1966 - December 1981	20*

*Includes documents on microfilm as well as published articles

Studies which met the criteria for inclusion were identified by the researchers from the sources listed below, and a list of studies was developed. As the researchers coded the studies for analysis, additional studies were found not to meet the inclusion criteria. For purposes of analysis it was necessary to be able to isolate the effects of a particular variable, either through inclusion of a control group that was not subjected to the variable, or a comparison group that received another treatment.

Also, multiple publications of the same study were uncovered, and duplicative presentations were eliminated so that each study was included only once. The most extreme example is the study that had been published in three different journals. The final listing of articles to be used in the reviews contained a total of 208 publications. It was not unusual for an article to describe more than one separate study, and studies frequently considered more than one independent variable.

The researchers have made every effort to avoid making inferences and basing their judgments only on facts. For instance, two articles in which Faria is the first author do not state the population surveyed. The authors are based in Canada, which may well mean that the studies were conducted on Canadian populations. Since there was no direct evidence regarding populaation and nothing in the writing that would suggest they were not done in the United States, they were not deleted.

After final agreement was reached on studies that were to be included, the two reviews were conducted independently, one pair of researchers using a meta-analytic approach, the other a descriptive or qualitative approach.

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